

# Long Paddock

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Slo-Mo Tsunami and Other Poems  
Bruce Dawe  
Puncher & Wattmann Poetry  
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Having not grown-up with Bruce Dawe's poetry I fail to read him with any sense of nostalgia, as I would, say, Walt Whitman, my first literary crush. It was in year nine, and the poem was 'Song of Myself'. I relish revisiting him on random days, in odd years, and I can't imagine how excited I'd be if he could somehow resurrect himself from the dead and publish something new. I can, however, make a guess that no matter the quality of the verse, no matter the relevance of style and / or theme, I'd find it impossible to not appreciate him out of pure respect, which I suppose could be redefined as 'nostalgia'. But, having not grown up with Bruce Dawe's poetry, this is not my dilemma with him.

Still, I am aware that Dawe is steeped in an Australian literary tradition and aware that he is often called 'the people's poet'. I understand that he has turned countless virgins of poetry readers onto a passion so unique it strengthens with time. I am also conscious of his accomplishments and his willingness to abide by the if-it-ain't-broke-don't-fix-it adage (which I am also somewhat humbled by), but I am resolved to deal with the quality of the verse and the relevance of the style and / or theme in this review.

*Slo-Mo Tsunami and Other Poems* is Dawe's twenty-second book in fifty years (happy anniversary, indeed!). It is as much social commentary as it is personal reflection, as political as it is spiritual, and in all of this there is the 'I': the poet who talks to his readers. And it would appear we are listening – I almost envisage us sitting in a semi-circle on the floor as he reads from his teacher's chair. What draws us in is perhaps his greatest downfall: a consistent accessibility. For instance, not a word in *Slo-Mo* requires a dictionary, and yet we consider Dawe a wordsmith. Are similes and metaphors enough? Is it that he writes

Now foreigners come, bearing (they tell us) freedom

-but freedom is only a word we have heard  
fluttering like a feather on the lips  
of the dying  
(‘Why Liberation from Dictatorship May Take Some Time...’)

and touches us just gently enough so that we allow the language in? Is it enough that he rhymes? Truly rhyming poetry is an ailing, if not dying art form. Modern rhyme tends to take on the twist or surprise in the form of an internal positioning rather than an end, or a near-rhyme rather than an exact (though I do love when a classically rhyming poem turns up in a year-end *Best of* anthology). I could argue that rhyming poetry has managed to go beyond ‘love’ rhyming with ‘dove’, as it does in Dawe’s ‘Sacrifices’, yet we are listening. If he is still being published by the likes of Puncher & Wattmann, we are listening.

Dawe is drawn to the religious poem, another ailing and dying art form. His is an unquestionable acceptance of the Christian God. The less accessible poem might appear more obtuse in grappling with certainty and therefore include an inevitable uncertainty – a look at the last five years’ winning and shortlisted poems of the Blake Prize in Poetry will point to that. And in a global society which embraces different gods, many gods and no gods at all, the type of society which is currently indicative of Australia, I would argue that religious uncertainty in poetry (perhaps I can redefine it as simply ‘spiritual poetry’) is more inclusive, and so the accessibility of a fine Christian poem is apt to be alienating. Not so, however, with the Aussie battler and the bush poem, which Dawe whips out here and there in such poems as ‘Players and Workers’. The theme may be tired and the tune over sung, but ocker will never go out of fashion. Countless bush poem societies and competitions and readings are proof of that, and I imagine Dawe has a strong following within that crowd.

Dawe offers his body and soul to us in *Slo-Mo* and dishes them up to us on a well-used platter but I fear he has failed to slice himself in such a way that blood stains the meat and gristle has us swallowing that which is awkward. Take ‘Questions of Security at an Australian Airport’ (which I happened to have aptly read awaiting a plane to Brisbane for a couple of poetry events), where an elderly man expresses his concern over not setting off the metal detector and is told he can go through again:

– this time the alarm went off – being a little deaf

I didn't actually *hear* it, but there was still  
no follow-up procedure (none at all!),  
no being taken aside, patted down, which  
between you and me  
I always rather liked,  
no taking off footwear to put through the scanner...  
It was like I didn't really exist in the full sense at all,  
and I could feel a ghostliness creeping over me then  
so that I haven't felt the same about airports ever since.

The connection between the ignored measures of airport security and an invisibility afforded to the aged (an old man can't possibly be a terrorist!) is, for me, the crux of the speaker's problem, but as soon as he touches on this poignant issue, he leaves it to return to his wife's annoyance with his preoccupation and his insistence that there be adequate security. This is either an example of me wanting something more from his themes or of Dawe not wanting his readers to work too hard, and the final lines seem to point to Dawe himself not wanting to work too hard:

But I still keep asking myself this question:  
*was* I being foolish, or just an extraordinarily responsible  
*citizen*? What do *you* think?

Didn't Dr Seuss end *The Cat in the Hat* in the same way? I digress (sort of). So the poem isn't about the deeper issue of aging in society and an expectation of 'going gentle into that good night', but about the blatant matter of airport security. Now I return to the comment of similes and metaphors, which I brought up in my first comment – I could use one here, because in this poem, a little ambiguity could go a long way.

Still, there is a certain amount of comfort in *Slo-Mo Tsunami*, as there generally is in Dawe's canon: an extolling of simple pleasures and temperate laughter. I don't need to read with a nostalgic inclination to see that the quality of Dawe's verse lies in his being a master of a minimalist poetic, and that the relevance of his style and / or theme fits with a timeless art form (because it may be dying, but it's not dead). I don't need to be nostalgic to see the small treasures of the book's title poem and others like 'The Blue Dress' or to appreciate his homage to poets that have gone before him (I am absolutely in love with the last line of 'The Ancients vs Moderns Cricket Match'). I needn't have been brought up with his poetry at all to value this book because *I'm* one of the people listening.